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AUTHOR Lieber, Paula E.
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ABSTRACT

Superordinates in Halliday and Hasan's analysis of cohesion are lexical items which refer to preceding terms, ideas, or actions, or to whole stretches of discourse, by naming a more inclusive category or class within which the antecedent is included. In written texts the interrelationships between superordinates and more specific terms, or hyponyms, provide patterns of meaning between and within sentences. English as a second language (ESL) students need to be taught to choose appropriate superordinates and hyponyms, which they will use across disciplines in their academic writing. Semantic distinctions, syntactical structures, and rhetorical structures and functions are also context independent, and so must be taught. For example, superordinates can serve as triggers for eliciting focus and development of a topic. In this process, instruction would be given on use of abstract terms, more specific terms, and the contexts in which each is appropriate. Literature on reading comprehension is a suggested source of vocabulary-teaching techniques that can be adapted for presenting, practicing and differentiating the use of superordinates. (AMH)

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Superordinate Terms in Expository Writing

(Paper presented at NYS ESOL BEA Fall Conference, Rochester, N.Y., October 1981)

Paula E. Lieber
Syracuse University

ED214389

Within a written text, the lexical items can be seen to fall into identifiable and describable linguistic and semantic patterns. "Long chains of interrelated words thread their way through coherent texts, reflecting the ordering of information as well as the [writer's] sense of appropriate stylistic variation" (Bernhardt, 1979, p. 24). In a student-written text, however, a lexical item may, on occasion, seem to obscure meaning more than clarify it, either because of excessive generality or because of a semantic mismatch between that item and the other terms or segments in the text which it is meant to relate to. This paper developed out of what gradually came to feel like a continual procession of _things_ through my students' papers, accompanied by _factors_ and _aspects_ that didn't seem to indicate factors or aspects of anything I could identify.

The title of this paper, for anyone familiar with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) analysis of cohesion, will immediately suggest one of their subcategories of lexical devices. The scope of my concern here extends beyond their use of the term "superordinate" as a type of cohesive device, but an explanation of that use and of several related terms will serve as a useful starting point.

Superordinates, in Halliday and Hasan's framework, are lexical items which refer anaphorically to preceding terms, ideas, or actions, or to whole stretches of discourse, but which do so by naming a broader, more inclusive category or class within which the referent, or antecedent, is included. For example, the word _furniture_ could provide a superordinate tie to previous instances of words such as _chair_ or _table_, while _media_ could pull together, in summary form, a discussion of newspapers, television, and so on (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, pp. 279-280; see also Lieber, 1979, pp. 141-142).

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Still within the Halliday and Hasan framework, the term which creates a lexical link may move to a level of even greater generality than that of superordination. This category of "general items," which are "the [topmost] superordinate members of major lexical sets" (Halliday & Hasan, p. 275), includes words such as _people_, _creature_, _thing_, _action_, _idea_, _fact_, _condition_, _place_, _way_, and so on. For my purposes here, I will, in most instances, merge the two categories under the term "superordinates."

As Mackay (1979) points out, "the introduction of a specific term

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which is later introduced as a more general term is characteristic of texts" (p. 84). For example, a specific item such as "Rolls Royce" might commonly be included at a later point within the class of "cars" and then later again be referred to within the still broader category of "vehicles." Similarly, an extended discussion is commonly summarized through the use of terms such as process, affair, case, problem, etc., when referring back to the entire segment of text.

Of course, the relationship between an item and a superordinate term including that item could go in the opposite direction in the text from that already discussed; that is, the more specific term can follow the more inclusive one. In this case, the more specific terms is considered a hyponym of the more general one. For example, a phrase such as "urban problems" might be specified through the use of hyponyms such as crime, heavy traffic, pollution, high rents, etc., and even those hyponyms could be further specified by terms such as muggings or burglary as hyponyms of crime, or a detail such as "$500 for a studio apartment" as a hyponym of high rent (see Halliday & Hasan, p. 285; Lieber, p. 142).

In written texts, however, the interrelationships between superordinates and hyponyms provide patterns of meaning not just between sentences, as in a strictly cohesive relationship, but also within sentences. In both intra-sentential, structural relations and inter-sentential, cohesive relations, the connections between superordinates and hyponyms contribute crucially to the texture of written discourse. Thus, the range of items which can serve as superordinates constitute an important component of students' vocabulary for comprehending the written passages they must read for their academic work. Equally importantly, students must learn to choose appropriate superordinates to refer to the details they have mentioned, or plan to include, in their writing; that is, they need to be able to choose class and category names which semantically can include, within their range of meaning, the details presented in a paper. Conversely, students also need to choose hyponyms from the same semantic category as the more general concepts they introduce. Eskey (1979) points out that "for advanced foreign students, vocabulary is crucial and probably should not be left to whatever turns up in the readings a particular teacher assigns. Words come in various systems and subsystems and may be . . . systematically taught" (p. 75). Although Eskey is speaking here specifically about students' needs for reading comprehension, his statement applies equally well to their needs for writing. Ideally, for their academic writing, our students should move toward a pro-

ductive mastery of superordinate/hyponym patterns which approximates the use of those patterns in their academic reading material.

If we exclude the broadest and vaguest of those within Halliday and Hasan's class of general items, these superordinates would seem to fall within what Cowan (1974) calls "sub-technical vocabulary" and Martin (1976) calls "academic vocabulary"--vocabulary consisting of "high frequency context-independent words occurring across disciplines [and focusing on] activities which characterize academic work" (Martin, p. 92).

In an attempt to get a sense of which superordinates students frequently tend to use--and/or to need--in at least the sort of writing done for English classes, I made a preliminary survey of paragraphs, compositions, and research papers written for both introductory and advanced composition classes. As I began collecting data, I was struck by the similarity in the range of the terms used--or not used but called for in a given context--in papers dealing with a wide range of disciplines and areas of interest or study. In almost every field and for almost every topic, the need arises to either introduce or refer back in some way to categories, lists, examples, or statements of factors involved, advantages and disadvantages, procedures/methods/steps/techniques, qualities, conditions, features, causes or reasons, effects or results, characteristics, and so on. Certainly some superordinates tend to be associated more with some types of subject matter than others: Apparatus, for example, springs to mind as a term more likely to be required by a science major than, say, a philosophy major. But most superordinates are quite context-independent, taking on specified meanings as they are associated with different details and specific terms or events (i.e., with different hyponyms), depending on the subject matter of a given paper. (Some examples--pulled at random from student papers--would be crisis, scandal, objective, problem, phenomenon, source or resource, component, methods, to name but a few.)

Of equal importance for students' academic writing needs is the fact that the structures in which these superordinates appear--that is, both the syntactic structures and what might loosely be called the rhetorical structures and functions--are also context-independent, found in writing from a full range of academic disciplines and from a variety of modes of academic essays and reports (including fairly technical report styles for the sciences, business, etc). One reason for this would be closely related to a point made by Martin (1981), namely, that so much of English academic discourse requires and is organized to present a continual movement back and forth

between general and specific; a second reason would be the need for some controlled stylistic variation in the choice of lexical items used to name even single entities.

On the handout (attached) I've summarized what appear so far to be the major functions utilizing structures in which superordinate/hyponym relations appear. As the examples there show, the superordinate and its hyponym/hyponyms are not always in a cohesive, inter-sentential relationship; very often they can both appear in a single sentence.

First, there are functions in which the superordinate has an anaphoric relation to the details it refers to --Groups I, III, V, and some uses of VI and VII. With group I--using the superordinate to refer in summary/shorthand form to a list--it's important to realize that the "list" generally does not appear simply as a numbered set of items but often involves fairly extensive discussion of the points being itemized. I've differentiated group I from group III to separate what are often more physical activities or attributes from basically mental or verbal activities. Of course the mental or verbal activities in group III are also often presented in enumerated or sequenced form: a preceding series of ideas, beliefs, statements, arguments, and so on.

The reverse of functions I and III would be group II: stating a main category and then following it with the subgroups or specific details into which it is divided. This is what happens also in outlining (group IX): a broad category is stated, then divided into component parts, each of which may then form a new category to be subdivided into still more specific components.

In connection with category VII, I should point out that renaming an item can be done in a slightly wider variety of ways than the items in that section of the handout illustrate. Many instances of renaming involve specific mention of a previously introduced specific item through use of a superordinate. One example would be the first item under group IV, Exemplification: The Chinese cabbage is referred to a second time, but through use of the superordinate phrase this vegetable. Here, and in similar instances, we can see the additional stylistic function of superordinates, namely, providing variation in lexical choice and thus eliminating the need for monotonous repetition of a term.

In examining student papers, I found that all of these functions on the handout appeared frequently, but not always with the right words to

express the superordinate category. Page 3 of the handout illustrates some of the typical problems that appeared, which I would like to discuss as two somewhat separate problem areas. (Also note the additional correct superordinates used in these examples--those which are in parentheses.)

For advanced ESL students, who deal in their essays and academic work with ideas, groupings of information, and often fairly abstract notions, one key problem is the choice of an appropriate abstraction that identifies or classifies the material they have presented or will be presenting. In particular, overuse of aspect and factor stands out as a problem. These items become convenient, catch-all terms that get used any time subject matter is being analyzed in any way. The often subtle differentiations between aspects, factors, characteristics, benefits, outcomes, considerations, qualities, causes, even techniques, goals, and so on, need to be clarified and sorted out in the course of whatever work is presented to develop the students' academic vocabulary, so that the words will be used appropriately. Often, also, there are subtle distinctions in the range of uses for fairly synonymous terms: The results of a study are frequently synonymous with the findings of a study, but imply that some kind of experimentation has gone on, while findings--which I feel would be called for in place of results in that example on page 3--can also refer to data from surveys or interviews, as in the studies mentioned in that example, or even at times to material developed from library research. To take another example, ideas and intentions, both the product of mental activities, might easily be lumped together, but intentions would provide greater precision when discussing a particular kind of idea, and conversely, could not be used to refer to other types of ideas.

Terms such as those presented on page 3 appear over and over in academic writing: in material presented for reading comprehension instruction, in model essays and model term papers used in composition instruction, and in material students read for their other academic coursework. However, they tend not to be the focus of specific teaching; rather, they are the words which provide the semantic frames for either teaching more specific vocabulary items or checking comprehension of information--through questions such as "What were the three aspects of the topic that the author discussed?" and "What were the results (or findings) or the study discussed in the reading?" Given this approach, these terms constitute an area of vocabulary that is often acquired from context--by osmosis, it sometimes seems--but not necessarily acquired together with the appropriate semantic restrictions on their use. In addition, students have a tendency to pick up a certain, often limited

set of these fairly abstract terms and use them whenever they seem to more or less fit. Often, in fact, the more general terms are the ones that students latch onto and use over and over again, because they lack a range of words that would enable the choice of more refined and precise specification. I have found, for example, that a certain student's papers will be characterized by use of a particular superordinate or general item; everything being discussed becomes, for example, a factor of something, or a case of something, or an aspect, or a condition--and of course almost any topic can be dealt with through extensive use of the perennial favorite, things (as in the examples on the bottom half of page 4 on the handout).

A second problem area in the use of superordinates involves the matching of a superordinate with considerably more concrete entities as hyponyms. Here the semantic distinctions are, or at least seem to be, easier to explain and demonstrate because physical entitities are involved, but the mere fact that concrete items or activities are being named by no means makes those distinctions immediately apparent to students. Some examples on page 3 which illustrate this problem would be the sentences illustrating information, instrument, and material. Confusion of a source and what the source contains, confusion of an end product and what that product is made from--these distinctions, while they often seem blatantly obvious to a native speaker, frequently need to be explained and illustrated, and can then be extended to apply to other sets of terms. With instrument on page 3, there is again the problem of differentiating close synonyms, of choosing a term appropriate for a given situation or context--that is, of differentiating the fields in which we use instruments from those in which we use materials, or implements, or tools, or apparatus, etc.

The examples at the top of page 4 further illustrate this sort of problem of matching superordinate and hyponyms; in those examples, like the illustrations for information and material, semantic categories have been mixed. Confusion between jobs and the people who hold those jobs, as in item b, is particularly common, as is confusion between an activity or technique and the item used in carrying out that activity, as in item f; variations on sentence h appear with alarming regularity in written discussions of library research sources.

Up to now, I've pointed out ways in which students might--or tend to--mismatch superordinates and hyponyms along semantic lines, whether dealing with abstract notions or concrete entities. I'd like to touch also on the problems connected to level of generality in the choice of a superordinate,

here focusing on the use of items from Halliday and Hasan's class of general items. These are words which are extremely common in English, particularly in spoken usage, and which students tend to learn quite early: thing, people, way, place, etc. As such, they are extremely comfortable words to use--and to overuse. If a student wants to discuss or refer to a category or a concept for which he does not know the appropriate specific name, then it immediately becomes a thing (as noted above), or perhaps stuff, particularly if the student has had ample opportunity to listen to casual speech of native speakers. Grammatically or semantically, we can rarely say the student is wrong. At the same time, as teachers, we are rarely willing to accept such reliance on these very general terms as sufficient. The examples at the bottom of page 4 illustrate two ways in which overly general terms can be used: In the first illustration, people, things, and places appear without any further amplification or specification; they are all a reader is left with after finishing the essay. In the second and third, general items do appear with following (or preceding) specification. In the third example in particular, each instance of thing implies a list, and in the complete composition that list is given or exemplified and then discussed more fully. But what is our sense of the quality and level of writing in this essay, or even of the quality of the thought behind an essay expressed in such terms? Even with the extended discussion of the "things" in each list, the essay seems dominated by the repetition of things, which creates a sense of vagueness about the subject matter as a whole. In addition, it's worth considering the distinctions which the student might have been able to make if he had named each group of "things" more specifically. For example, in discussing the four seasons, he could have focused on one type or group of "things" to enjoy, or he might have found it possible to discuss a range of subcategories: activities, the beauty of natural scenery, weather, and so on. The use of a general, catch-all term, however, if it does not actually prevent amplification of this sort, at least allows a student to avoid dealing with potential details and specification--to say, in effect, to a reader, "Well, you know what I mean, so you can imagine it for yourself."

This last point suggests what seems to me to be an important role for superordinates in writing classes: They can serve as triggers for eliciting focus and development of a topic. Shaughnessy (1977) suggests that students' vocabulary "affects what they are able to say as writers. . . . If the writer has words to choose from, he is led into making differentiations that might otherwise not occur to him" (p. 198). Since superordinates tend to imply

lists and sets of details, we can aid students in making those "distinctions that might otherwise not occur to them" by encouraging them to supply lists, to articulate the details they are lumping together, and then guide them in considering which of those details can and should be discussed in a paper. In this way, they may see more clearly the ways in which general statements can be developed, supported, explained, and even at times further subdivided, with discussion of those more specific subdivisions contributing important information to a reader's understanding of the topic being written about. In addition, eliciting lists and sets of details can enable a student to consider which, if not all, of the items involved he is really writing about, and if necessary, to focus his attention on a more specific (and more specifically named) subset of a broad category.

But before--or at least in addition to--encouraging students to explore the range of items, ideas, steps, categories, etc., implied by the superordinates that they use, we have to pay considerable attention to teaching them these terms--teaching them a broad range of terms to use, the contexts in which each is appropriate, and the specific details which each implies, refers to, or can be associated with. The literature on teaching reading comprehension is a particularly rich source of vocabulary-teaching techniques that can be adapted for presenting, practicing, and differentiating the use of superordinates, and a good place to start, when choosing the superordinates to teach, might be through investigation of the use of such terms in students' reading material (for all of their classes, not just their ESL classes).

As Holloway (1981) states,

> we often find in our students' writing a relatively narrow range of referents. They settle for tiresome repetition of words or for inappriate "synonyms" from a thesaurus. More seriously, they often fail to recognize that their words imply categories and relationships. . . . Is the specific item that students picture when they write . . . the item that they choose to write down? Or do they unconsciously move up into higher levels of abstraction (or categories) . . . and then wonder why their writing doesn't seem to say what they mean? (p. 212)

Classroom effort designed to counteract the tendencies that Holloway both states and suggests can provide a much wider range of benefits than simply helping our students to avoid writing sentences such as "At this point it is appropriate to speak of the benefits of conformity, but it is far easier to speak of the deficits of individuality." The expansion of vocabulary to

include a broader repertoire of superordinates can aid students in understanding much of their academic material more easily, as well as in perceiving more of the organizational patterns and subtle distinctions found in that reading material; in addition, it will provide them with terms necessary for clarifying and enlivening the points they wish to make in compositions, as well as leading them to focus, develop, specify, and expand the topics that they write about.

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(1) P. Lieber HANDOUT

Functions utilizing superordinate-hyponym relationships

I. Summary/anaphoric reference to a list:

They lean over and spit [the seeds] directly into their trays . . . and when they finish eating, they proceed at once to the nearest tap to rub their teeth and gargle. Both practices . . .

[after several paragraphs about hydroelectric power] Despite these favorable characteristics of hydroelectric power . . .

II. Introducing divisions of topics and categories of details to be discussed:

We can distinguish imagination in two categories: creative and reproductive imagination.

[Mt. Kilimanjaro] has got all sorts of climates, vegetations, and wildlife.

In general, to maintain itself in power, the political machine should possess three basic mechanisms. First . . . Second . . . Third . . . Through these mechanisms public desires are satisfied and . . . (also summarizing use)

III. Anaphoric reference to an idea or action:

Many philosophers believe that literacy is not the key to development, but their theories can easily be disproved.

For Newton . . . space is and must be "absolute and immutable. . . ."[3] In order to defind this belief of his, Newton presented three arguments. (given in the following paragraphs) (also introducing use)

After high school graduation, many students seek higher education in college. One good reason for taking such an unthinkable decision . . .

IV. Exemplification:

Instead of Japanese cabbage, Chinese cabbage will suffice. This vegetable . . .

Some familiar vegetables such as onions, green onions and mushrooms will add variety. (also anaphoric use)

People's decision to choose a particular field of study in many cases have been influenced by some external forces among which are the parents, friends, respect and money a particular field commands.

V. Unspecified additional information or details:

All of these beach hotels have swimming pools and many other facilities.

VI. Choice of an item from a previously specified list or category:

On humid places, diseases develop more easily. . . . Another disadvantage of humid places is that lungs suffer.

One reason . . .

In the first case . . .

VII. Renaming or restatement; definition:

There is no doubt that the desired goal, that is, the increase of sales, has been . . .

Definition (con't)

. . . psychoactive drugs. These drugs are chemical substances which alter consciousness.

[Political] parties may be defined as any political organizations whose goal is to gain political power so that they can shape and determine public policy.

VIII. Indication of exceptions to a generalization or category:

You can check out any material except reserved and reference books, microfilms, and periodicals.

IX. Outlining: (similar to II. and IV. above)

C. Multi-purpose capabilities

1. Power generation
2. Creation of navigable waterways
3. Flood Control
4. Irrigation
5. Recreation

(3)

HANDOUT

P. Lieber

Mismatch between superordinates and hyponyms

ASPECT A major aspect of job enrichment is that it is not a textbook approach, but a human approach to good management.

?Another aspect that varies with the climate is sports.

CASE From this junk is very easy to make another useful (things.) For this is necessary only to work up the paper or metal and in this case we won't use so much natural resources.

There are different (techniques) or (ways) to present information such as: letting the advertisement be interpretted by the recipients or having a one-sided or two-sided argument. The first case depends on the intelligence of the recipients.

ENTITY Lucio Costa . . . supported a foundation called "SPHAN." The leaders of this national foundation elected him as an architect to the entity.

FACTOR The thermal pollution of river and lake water . . . is also not a factor in hydroelectric power generation.

FEATURE How interesting these pictures might be is not of relevance, as the most important feature for [the amateur photographer] is to be seen with his camera rather than using it.

IDEA Though the lazy students may opt for sitting in the back to avoid the teacher's attention, the teacher is usually aware of this mean idea.

INFORMATION Here is where you would find factual information such as encyclopedias and Bibliographies.

INSTRUMENT In knitting a scarf, the first thing to do is get all your (materials) ready before you start. . . . wool . . . needles . . . Once you have all your instruments ready . . .

PART [in advertising] The speed of speech is another (factor) that seems to be an important part of credibility.

RESULT A study on suicide . . . suggests that heavy drug users have about 15% more chance to commit suicide. The data suggests that people are liable to use drugs as a suicidal weapon.[26] The results of these studies are quite disturbing.

TOPIC A number of (factors) go into choosing a career. Money, the state of the economy, personal talent and desire, personal aims and location of jobs. Of these (factors,) money is often one of the major considerations. . . . The topic of money influences many decisions.

MATERIAL Sweaters and other woolen materials are hardly produced.

(3)

Mismatch in categorization of superordinate and hyponyms

a. . . . with the purpose of getting funds to help an Institution like the Red Cross, Leukemia, blood donors, etc.

b. Jobs such as a nurse, operator, and homemaker have traditionally been a woman's role. When men choose to pursue these careers, society looks down on them.

c. In the Western societies one now finds women in positions that were unthinkable ten years ago. Some examples are staff sargeants who . . . business executives . . . as well as the many European minister positions filled by women.

d. There are several sports in my country. . . . Basketball and baseball . . . Tennis . . . Cockfights is another popular sport in the island.

e. Profits constitute one of the main reasons for people choosing a career.

f. There are many ways in which you could find the sources needed. One of the most common ones is the card catalog.

g. . . . have facilities such as fishing, horse riding, trips to islands, water skiing and tennis.

h. The sorts of documents which could be found in the documents section of the library are foreign governments, the United Nations, etc.

THINGS, etc.

School gives me the opportunity to meet new (people) and know different (things) from different (places).

The whole process [of admitting students] is quite different but on the whole they get to the same (thing.) Only the persons they think would be most appropriate is taken from the group. . . . Both universities . . . are racing the same objective, and that is to have the best people with they.

How much will it cost? Undoubtedly it is one of the most asked questions of people today. Why do people think that every good (thing) in life has a price? . . . Every material or man-made item has a price. It is only the natural (things), the ones created by God, that are free. . . . Among these many free and simple (things) in life I came up with four very important points: the natural phenomenas, the healthy natural foods, the human relationships, and the workings of the body and the mind. . . . First of all, we were born in a world full of richness and (things) to enjoy. Mother nature offers us fresh air, mountains, clouds, trees, and all the (things) that surround us. . . . Everyone loves the four seasons, for example; each one has its own (things) to enjoy. . . . Besides the good (things) to enjoy we can find delicious foods it we take a little time. . . . Moreover, we have other important (things) in life that come free to us. Most of us have a family or at least had one at one time. . . . Finally, one of the most important free (things) that God gave us are our senses. . . . Next time you complain about how expensive life is, take a minute and think about all these free (things) that we never noticed.